

Dimensionality of Organizational Trust

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Trust facilitates individual and organizational learning, and is often misunderstood by organizations although they must continuously learn in order to attain organizational goals and survive. Leaders of organizations often view trust defensively and their reactions may impede organizational learning. This paper builds on prior research concerning antecedents of organizational trust, explores key behaviors that may influence trust in organizations and possible linkages between trust and distrust, and discusses preliminary results based on a pilot study.

This paper provides a brief overview of the literature relating to organizational and individual trust and explores the relationships among three constructs: adult attachment, organizational trust, and distrust. The paper opens with a brief problem statement regarding our understanding of aspects of organizational trust. It then provides an overview of the literature on organizational trust and a discussion of definitions of trust. The paper then briefly explores a model looking at trust and distrust as separate variables, as well as measurement issues regarding organizational trust and distrust.

The paper traces the trust that individuals manifest in organizations to the roots of trusting relationships developed during childhood attachment experience. The paper continues with a discussion of trust and distrust from a conceptual perspective as well as the challenges of accurately measuring these constructs. The paper continues with a summary discussion of the three constructs of adult attachment, organizational trust, and distrust, their relationships with each other followed by a brief discussion of the influence of leader defensiveness on personal and organizational learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of preliminary findings based on a pilot test of instruments to measure the three constructs, a brief discussion of plans for additional research to gain better understanding of the relationship among them, and considerations for practice.

Theoretical Framework

Individual trust has a long history of being a crucial concept for understanding interpersonal and group dynamics. Trust plays a key role in organizational learning and performance (Shaw, 1997), and organizations must learn continuously (Drucker, 1999; Senge, 1990). However, trust is often ignored by organizations, even though organizations have generally declined in their perceived trustworthiness (Tyler & Kramer, 1996). Trust is usually viewed as important for successful organizational function, and distrust is considered deleterious for organizational harmony and performance. For example, Drucker (1999) assumes that trust is present and is important for the exchange of knowledge within organizations and that this exchange is crucial if organizations are to successfully compete and survive (Drucker, 1999). However, leaders of organizations often respond defensively to inquiries regarding trust levels in their organizations and their responses may hinder personal as well as organizational learning.

The concept of organizational trust is elusive and subject to a wide range of definitions, as well as contributing factors and circumstances. As with other organizational constructs such as culture or climate, we cannot measure organizational trust directly. Instead, we rely on the perceptions of individuals within the organization, who will have different views of recalled situations and contexts based on their experience. Those views are represented as variance in the measure, while the mean measure is considered to be a descriptive statistic for the organization as a whole.

Contrasting Definitions of Trust

There is no agreement among prominent authors on a single definition of individual or organizational trust (Kurstedt, 2002). This lack of agreement on a definition of trust means that different authors not only perceive trust in different ways (often within the context of their academic domains), but also that they discuss different constructs

when they speak of trust. This use of multiple definitions of trust contributes to the confusion in the literature because authors use the same or similar terms to describe different constructs. One definition of trust developed by Shockley-Zalabak and associates views organizational trust and distrust as opposite ends of a single variable that are inversely related to each other. In contrast, a model of trust and distrust presented by Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies (1998) is based on the contention that trust and distrust are separate but linked dimensions. Another common conceptualization of organizational trust considers it to be a compendium of interactional trust in an organization context with peer, supervisory and upper management interpersonal interactions. These three different measures have some very important conceptual distinctions.

Is the nature of trust dependent on the object of the trust? That means that the appropriate approach is to measure across objects and consider the objects separately. Then, organizational trust would be either the total of all interactions in the workplace, or separate constructs to be explored separately because of the object of trust.

Shockley defines trust as follows:

“The organization’s willingness, based on its culture and communication behaviors in relationships and transactions, to be appropriately vulnerable if it believes that another individual, group or organization is competent, open, and honest, concerned, reliable, and identified with common goals, norms and values.” (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, & Cesaria, 2000) (p. 8)

This definition implies that organizational trust is multidimensional. It suggests characteristics of an organization that constitute trust, that trust is a set of organizational characteristics providing an atmosphere for others to act in certain ways. It also refers to vulnerability, suggesting that trust creates an atmosphere of safety in which people don’t fear punishment or retribution. Those characteristics create that atmosphere. Is trust a multifaceted construct, influenced by but apart from the objects of trust? If so, those distinct characteristics of trust should be measured independently. These independent measures would then be considered separately

Lewicki et al. define trust quite differently from Shockley and also link trust to distrust. They define trust as:

“...confident positive expectations regarding another’s conduct,” and they define distrust as “confident negative expectations regarding another’s conduct” (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998, p. 439).

This definition implies that trust is more one-dimensional, and distinct from the concept of distrust. At least, it uses two different terms to describe each end of a continuum. The concept that trust and distrust could exist simultaneously is interesting, and different from other concepts in the literature.

A Model of Trust and Distrust

Lewicki et al. view trust and distrust as separate but linked constructs and provide a model (Table 1) that is useful for examining trust in individuals and organizations and for showing how trust may change over time. Their model provides a conceptual richness and depth to our understanding because it shows the interplay of trust and distrust and the ambiguity inherent in interpersonal transactions in the workplace. They assert that trust and distrust are two dimensions that are interconnected, that they exist along indefinite continuums, and that both are often present in interpersonal situations.

The discussion of Lewicki et al. provides important insight into individual’s behavior in organizations that may reflect contextual influences as well as the ambiguity and conflicted feelings that are frequently present in workplace situations. For example, an individual’s perception of whether to trust a supervisor or upper level manager may be heavily influenced by the salience and recency of experience with that person. This is particularly true because trust is fragile and most employees in the workplace have learned to be wary. Trust can also be influenced by organizational culture which tends to be developed over time and may be particularly shaped by the initial leaders of an organization (Schein, 1996). For example, repressive and punitive leaders may establish a climate of fear in their organizations.

Specifically, the Lewicki et al. model is useful for developing a better understanding of the behavioral dynamics and ambiguities of trust and distrust in an organizational situation. For example, when high trust and low distrust are present, new initiatives can be undertaken and opportunities pursued (Quadrant 1). Under conditions of high trust and low distrust, individuals tend to perceive each other as partners pursuing common objectives. They

are also likely to identify with the values of their partner and have positive affect for their partner. On the other hand, when high distrust and low trust exist between individuals, harmful motives on the part of others are assumed and defensive reactions predominate (Quadrant 4).

The conceptualization presented by Lewicki et al. in this table ties to extensive work by other researchers who conclude that many individuals, including leaders, in organizations operate in a defensive manner and tend to focus on self protection and their own best interests (Argyris, 1993). Argyris also points out that the defensive actions taken by individuals in organizations can contribute to a disparity between espoused values and the values in use in the organization and that defensiveness can also hinder organizational learning.

Although the Lewicki et al. model is helpful in understanding trust, it also has some shortcomings. First, they do not explain why some individuals have a higher level of trust when approaching a given situation. Second, the model is somewhat simplistic because it places individual reactions into four distinct categories and thereby omits ambivalent reactions that do not fit neatly into one of the four categories, a general and simple presentation of individual responses that may sacrifice accuracy (Weick, 1979). Third, the model is biased toward high trust and low distrust as a desirable approach to a situation for an individual. In many workplace situations, wariness is advisable (Kramer, 2002).

Table 1. *Integrating Trust and Distrust.*

High Trust Characterized by Hope, Faith, Confidence, Assurance, Initiative	Quadrant 1 “Friend” High value congruence, Interdependence promoted, Opportunities pursued enthusiastically, New initiatives embraced	Quadrant 2 “Trust but Verify” Relationships highly segmented and bounded, Opportunities pursued with caution, Down-side Risks/Vulnerabilities Continually Monitored
Low Trust Characterized by No Hope, No Faith, No Confidence, Passivity, Hesitance	Quadrant 3 “Wait and See” Casual Acquaintances, Limited Interdependence, Bounded, Arms-length Transactions, Professional Courtesy	Quadrant 4 “Enemy” Undesirable events expected, Harmful motives assumed, Interdependence managed, Preemption: Best Offense is a Good Defense, Paranoia
	Low Distrust Characterized by No Fear, Absence of Skepticism, Absence of Cynicism, Low Monitoring, No Vigilance	High Distrust Characterized by Fear, Skepticism, Cynicism, Wariness and Watchfulness, Vigilance

Note: Adapted from Lewicki et al., 1998

Although the views of Lewicki et al. regarding trust are intriguing, their work is at the theory-building stage of development. We have not seen any quantitative empirical work that confirms the accuracy of their view of trust and distrust as separate but linked variables. Although it is intriguing to view trust and distrust consistent with their theory, additional research is needed to demonstrate that these are indeed separate variables and that they are not so heavily correlated with each other that they in fact need to be viewed as opposite extremes of a single variable. Further exploration of the validity of the Lewicki et al. model would be greatly aided by the development of an instrument that would measure trust and distrust as separate variables.

The Connections of Adult Attachment, Trust, and Distrust

Although there is a basis for connecting the constructs of attachment, trust and distrust in order to better understand organizations and their function, there is limited discussion of the constructs in the literature, and these discussions are usually focused within particular academic domains. As a result we have a limited understanding of the possible relationships between trust and distrust. We are also uncertain how best to measure organizational trust and whether key behaviors in the workplace do indeed have a statistically significant influence on organizational trust.

Antecedents of Trust

John Bowlby, M.D. (1969), an English psychiatrist, is credited with creating attachment theory and contends that childhood attachment to a significant caregiver is biologically rooted and that it is crucial for a child to develop trust. The propensity to trust learned during childhood substantially influences a person's lifetime relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969, 1988). As a result of her research, Klohnen noted that attachment styles developed in childhood tend to be resilient throughout life (Klohnen & Bera, 1998). Through our research, we were able to confirm that about 20% of the variance in organizational trust is attributable to adult attachment (Adams, 2004).

Erikson (1997), sees the need to develop trust and avoid distrust as the first developmental hurdle facing the individual. Bowlby focuses on attachment as a prerequisite for secure relationships later in life. Erickson uses slightly different terminology, but his message is the same: Normal human development is based on the ability to trust. He also asserts that individuals who fail to develop trusting relationships will find their personal development stunted (Erikson, 1997).

Based on the work of Chelune, Petronio, and Pistole, we had expected that emotional self-disclosure (ESD) would also facilitate bonding between individuals in the workplace. Self-disclosure in relationships tends to be reciprocal and to occur progressively over time, and helps individuals to form friendships and intimate relationships. These friendships and relationships are formed in part through the process of sharing personal and sensitive information with each other in steps that could be viewed as part of a bonding or attachment process. The amount and content of one's ESD could be viewed, in part, as a behavioral manifestation of one's adult attachment. However, we found during our research that ESD had no statistically significant influence on organizational trust in any of our analyses (Adams, 2004). And we have dropped ESD from further research consideration in relation to organizational trust.

Statement of the Problem

The literature and research is inconsistent concerning the conceptualization of organizational trust, although usually consistent regarding the importance placed on trust for effective organizational function. Key parts of the discussion of trust in the management and adult learning literature that are now missing are the need to further explore the ambiguities of trust, different ways of measuring trust, possible linkages between trust and distrust, and the need to refine our instruments for measuring key behaviors that may increase organizational trust. There is a need for a unified approach to discovering antecedents, and an appropriate approach for measuring characteristics and features of organizational trust. A common conceptual understanding of organization trust must be part of this approach.

Research Questions

Specifically, the authors of this paper propose to focus their research study on three questions.

1. What portion of the variance in employee's perception of organizational trust is explained by employee's adult attachment and key behaviors?
2. Are trust and distrust separate but linked variables?
3. Is it useful to measure trust using instruments that explore trust from different vantage points, or can a single instrument serve this purpose?

Method

Instrumentation

As a part of their research, Shockley et al. developed a model consisting of five factors and an instrument consisting of 29 items. The five factors are (a) competence; (b) open and honest communication; (c) concern for employees; (d) reliability; and (e) sharing of common goals, norms, and values. The breach of any one of these factors could damage the individual's perception of trust.

Although the Shockley-Zalabak et al. instrument appears to be useful in measuring organizational trust, it has some shortcomings. First, although they used structural equations modeling and path analysis to develop a model of organizational trust, job satisfaction, and effectiveness, their discussion of the model is brief. It is not clear what the relationship is between the five trust factors. Second, we found no information showing how the items in their instrument loaded to the factors in their model. Third, we found no factor analysis in their report that displayed the correlations between the factors that make up trust in their model. These three shortcomings raise technical questions regarding the reliability and validity of their instrument.

Despite these challenges, the instrument developed by Shockley and associates was used as one measure for organizational trust. These factors have intuitive appeal, and may provide a starting point especially for leaders who desire to enhance trust in their organizations. Further testing of the instrument and more information regarding its factor structure and the correlations between its factors could be helpful. Because the instrument purports to measure the influence of key behaviors in the workplace on organizational trust, it might help us develop information on key behaviors that would help leaders as they endeavor to build trust in their organizations.

We have also refined an instrument that measures trust in relation to three objects of trust in the workplace: trust in supervisor, trust in peers, and trust in upper level management. We found very good reliability scores for these factors (all were about .90) (Adams, 2004). This is a conceptually different approach to measurement compared to measuring specific organizational factors. It would be useful to have an empirical comparison to explore if the Shockley et al. instrument is measuring the same organizational trust phenomenon in a different way.

Additional items measuring trust and distrust were constructed following the model taken from Lewicki et al. This included four items describing each condition in each of the four quadrants.

Pilot Study Procedure

Based on a convenience sample, we gathered survey data from graduate students attending a university in the Raleigh, North Carolina, metropolitan area. Thirty students, including 23 females and 6 males, completed the pilot study survey and all signed the consent form which advised them about the research and voluntary participation. The average age of the students was 32 years, and 73% held a bachelor's degree; 27% held a masters degree. On average, they had spent 3.8 years with their employers and 2.4 years with their supervisor. Seventy-three percent classed themselves as professionals, 17% as administrative staff, 3% as supervisors, and 7% as managers.

Pilot Study Results

Because of the small sample size for the pilot study, we were not able to conduct higher level statistical analyses which will be required to answer research question 1. However, we did conduct correlation and other analyses on the data which gave us some very preliminary information regarding research questions two and three. We would emphasize that these findings are suggestive only and cannot be generalized because of the very small sample size used for the pilot study. A considerably larger sample must be drawn and extensive analyses performed in order to obtain reliable findings which might be generalized.

Concerning research question 2, it appears that trust and distrust may be separate though linked variables as postulated by Lewicki, et al. Based on our analyses, the correlation between trust and distrust from the sample was .256 ($p = .198$). We were also reviewed the questions used to measure trust and distrust for reliability. Four questions used to measure trust had an alpha reliability of .763 and seven questions used to measure distrust had an alpha reliability of .701, both of which are good.

Concerning research question 3, we found that the Shockley and associates instrument may need further refinement. Specifically, we found substantial correlations (above the .7 level) among three of their five factors. For example: "honest and open communication" correlated with "caring" at .742 ($p = .000$), and "shared values" at .803 ($p = .000$). We found correlations above the .7 level for "reliability" and "caring," as well. Factor correlations above the .7 level may indicate that the factors are so heavily overlapping that they do not contribute to more fully understanding the construct that is being measured. The Shockley and associates instrument may require revision of its items and its factor structure before it can be used to accurately and reliably measure trust behaviors. The items

(and scales) measuring trust from the perspective of the object of the relationship appeared to be robust, showing high reliability and clean factor structure, consistent with our earlier research findings (Adams, 2004).

Summary and Considerations for Human Resource Development Theory, Research, and Practice

A Proposed Research Agenda

Research on trust needs to concentrate on arriving at a common conceptual understanding and a framework for exploring the constructs of organizational trust and distrust. In addition, researchers need to build on the work of their colleagues in the field of organizational trust. Finally, more attention should be paid to overall measures than to explaining the variance observed within organizations. Future research on organizational trust and distrust would benefit from an interdisciplinary review of trust and distrust that increases our understanding of these constructs as well as understanding key behaviors in the workplace that may influence organizational trust. This understanding could prompt leaders of organizations to examine and adjust their own behavior in order to build trust in their organizations. This understanding could also facilitate interventions in organizations that are designed to increase trust levels and thereby contribute to increased productivity and the achievement of strategic goals.

In order to explore the relationships between the three constructs of adult attachment, and organizational trust and distrust, the authors will use instruments to gather data from two or more organizations. Participants from the respective organizations will all be volunteers and the samples will be convenience samples. The data collected will be analyzed using statistical techniques including hierarchical multiple regression. This research study is currently underway and pilot testing of the survey instruments has been completed and preliminary analysis of the gathered data has been conducted.

Considerations for Practice

Trust is multifaceted and complex. Based on the work of Erikson and Bowlby, we know that the capacity to trust is very important for individual development of satisfying relationships that nurture personal growth. Trust is also crucial for the sharing of information and networking in the workplace and is one of the keys for individual as well as organizational learning (Reina & Reina, 1999). Unfortunately, we have an incomplete understanding of the nexus between adult attachment and organizational trust and distrust and the ambiguity of organizational behaviors. It is clear that trust is crucial for individual learning, the sharing of information, and the development of productive team relationships. At least on an intuitive level, there appears to be a connection among these constructs. However, in the literature, the discussion has been fragmented and has been largely confined to particular academic domains. Few authors have ventured into a broader discussion so that the scholarly community could benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the connections among these constructs. Our research project that is currently underway and it may help to clarify how much of the variance in organizational trust is explained by adult attachment and key behaviors as well as exploring whether trust and distrust are separate though linked constructs.

The Role of Leadership

We have frequently observed during our research that leaders have substantial ambivalence in their willingness to explore trust levels within their organizations. Leaders are often reluctant to explore and learn about trust in their organizations because of defensiveness, a desire to protect their perceived power in the organization, and a desire to buttress their own self esteem. Many leaders view trust as a reflection on their personal capabilities and fitness for leadership, and few are willing to explore and learn about an area where they may receive negative feedback. Leaders often view themselves as having very limited direct influence on trust levels in their organizations. While understandable from the vantage point of self protection, this defensiveness also reduces the opportunities of both leaders and organizations to learn about trust and possible behavior changes that could increase levels of trust.

How This Research May Contribute to New Knowledge in Human Resource Development

A clearer conceptualization of organizational trust may lead to improved approaches to measurement, and, as a result, a more complete understanding of the ambiguities of organizational behaviors and problems. Findings from the ongoing research could also lead to a better understanding of the contextual factors affecting trust in organizations. This could ultimately better inform broader issues concerning leadership behavior, organizational culture, and the conduct of interventions in organizations to enhance trust.

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